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AUTHOR Dyer, Beverly G.; Miller, Michael
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ABSTRACT

This review of the literature on the department chair position in institutions of higher education examines critical issues related to the chair position. It concludes that research has provided a clear picture of who is involved in the chair position but has not clarified ways to improve the effectiveness of the position. The review is organized into two sections. The first, on the historical development of the chair position, focuses on the time period during which the chair position was first formalized (1880s to 1925) and the impact played by business, industry, and politics on the formation of the administrative position. The second, on contemporary research on the chair position, examines the various roles and responsibilities, needed skills, and challenges and coping strategies facing the chairperson. Lack of chairperson training is identified as a critical issue. (Contains 19 references.) (DB)

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A Critical Review of Literature Related to the Department Chair Position

Dr. Beverly G. Dyer
Postdoctoral Scholar
Higher Education Administration Program
University of Alabama
Box 870302
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
Email: bdyer@sonet.net

Dr. Michael Miller
Associate Professor
Higher Education Administration
University of Alabama
Box 870302
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
Email: mmiller@bamaed.ua.edu

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BEVERLY G DYER

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Abstract

The department chair position is vital to the operation of higher education institutions. The study of the chair position has received some attention, although these studies have been exploratory rather than inferential in nature. Research has provided a clear picture of who is involved in the chair position, although these studies have not identified how to create more and better effectiveness with the position. The current examination provided a discussion of critical issues related to the chair position and highlights some of the key literature on the position.

Colleges and universities have experienced substantial growth during the past decade, with over 4,000 institutions now being reported in such publications as the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac and the NEA Almanac. These institutions face an increased competition for students, and subsequently rely on effective and efficient management strategies to achieve success. This management is based on a number of positions, including the department chairperson. The chair position evolved out of the Progressive era of the early-1900s, and has evolved to one of the most important and critical on any college campus. Department chairs make approximately 80% of all decisions on college campuses, and are primarily responsible for both the budgeting and planning activities of the academic enterprise.

The department chair participates in key decisions and oversees the daily operation of personnel, both clerical and professional, and is responsible for the primary college consumer, students. The chair is often referred to as being caught in the middle between upper-level administrators and faculty. As a result, the chair often has the responsibility of conveying upper-level administrative decisions to faculty while at the same time conveying faculty concerns to senior administrators. Thus the chairperson plays vastly different roles and must cope with competing responsibilities. Additionally, chairs often assume these positions with little to no formal training, and as a result, must learn on the job or rely on others to provide them informal training.

The chair, as a position on campus, has experienced a growing body of examination, with special attention provided to the roles, functions, and responsibilities of the chair position. Research has examined the relationship between chairs and faculty members, the chairperson as a professional manager, and the chair's relationship with

senior administrators. The result is a disparate, growing, sporadic body of literature that has not been thoroughly synthesized. The following examination of literature available through the Educational Resource Information Clearinghouse initiates the critical dialogue about what research exists and where it is going. The review of research presented here falls into two distinct categories: the historical development and formation of the chair position and contemporary research on the chair position.

Historical Development of the Chair

Vacik (1997) wrote that although little research has been conducted on the historical development of the department chair, a review of the existing literature and research indicated that the chair position was first formalized during the period of 1870 to 1925. Significant events that impacted the development of the chair position were the Reconstruction Period, Morrill legislation, vocational education, a new interest in philanthropy and development, and a move from society based on agriculture and land interest to one based on industry. Other events that impacted the development of the chair position were the reorganization of higher education institutions and changes in business, industry, and politics. Although the Reconstruction Period and Morrill legislation played a major role in changing institutions of higher education, it is the role played by business, industry, and politics that had the most impact on the development of the chair position.

During the period from the 1880s to 1890s, departments or academic units began to develop and increase in number. The growth in the development and numbers of chair positions grew out of a need for a more specialized form of education. In the past, the

faculty at higher education institutions were expected to play a number of roles in addition to teaching. During the period from the 1880s to 1890s, institutions realized the need to provide more than a liberal education to their student population. During this time, many institutions were under increasing pressure by business, industry, and government to provide a more educated labor pool and to perform research. As business and industry leaders, as well as the government, provided funding for research and education in specialized areas, the need for academic units or departments in a particular area of study grew. Along with this need for academic units or departments in specialized areas was the need for administrators to oversee the functions and operations of the unit or department. Therefore, as a result of the development of separate academic units or departments, administrators, department chairs, or division chairs were hired or appointed to oversee the newly developed academic units or departments in institutions.

Vacik (1997) conducted a study of 13 scholars (response rate of 86.7%) who were perceived to be experts on the academic department chair. Vacik attempted to identify the critical factors which impacted the development of the department chair position in higher education institutions. A Delphi research technique, conducted in three rounds, was used to attempt to obtain a consensus of the critical factors which impacted the development of the academic department chair. According to Vacik, the study identified 29 specific incidents which impacted the chair position. The 29 incidents were collapsed into five thematic categories: management and personnel, curricular issues, federal involvement, technological advances, and revenues and funding.

Vacik (1997) further reported that the federal government, along with the private sector of business and industry, had played a major role in the definition and evolution of

the department chair. The role of the federal government, along with business and industry from the private sector which forced the greater compartmentalization of responsibilities, was the number one incident identified as having had an impact on the development of department heads. Vacik also reported that the incidents or factors identified by scholar experts were comprised of external forces rather than internal forces. None of the reported incidents specifically considered the internal factors of students or teacher issues.

Contemporary Research on the Chair Position

Tucker (1984) presented findings, based on existing literature and research, on the various roles, responsibilities, and power of the department chair. Various tasks of the department chair include departmental governance, faculty recruitment and selection, student recruitment and selection, preparation of budgets, preparation of annual reports, and professional development. Tucker further presented findings on the department chairs at different types of higher education institutions and how the department chair's role, responsibilities, and power varies based on type and size of institution. In addition, Tucker presented findings on the categories of leadership style and how different leadership styles determined leadership behavior.

Moisan (1987) presented a list of concepts necessary for developing and enhancing marketing in higher education institutions. Based on the existing literature and research, 10 concepts were identified. According to Moisan, the answer to the financial problems of higher education institutions is the use of marketing. Moisan argued that the marketing efforts of institutions have increased 63% since 1980. Moisan also argued that

the marketing efforts of higher education institutions must be collaborative and proactive. The 10 concepts reported by Moisan included protagonist, purpose, perceptions, planning, positioning, politics, prioritizing and pruning, promotion, passion, and performance. According to Moisan, these 10 concepts can be used to determine who will lead the way for effective marketing and the education of others, what perceptions of the institution exist both externally and internally, how strategic planning will be implemented and why, and what the effects will be politically, both externally and internally. In addition, the concepts can also be used to determine the short and long-term effects, the role of marketing research in the planning process, resource allocation, and the correct promotional mix. Furthermore, these concepts address the need for an individual with passion and commitment to help implement the changes, planning and marketing, and to measure the performance of the marketing concept.

Bennett (1989), a Provost at Siena Heights College, Adrian, Michigan, presented a series of arguments about types of department chairs. He identified four types: hopefuls, survivors, transients, and adversarial. The hopeful chair is typically new to the position, recognizes that a difference can be made, and "can see the tension of role ambiguity as a positive thing, masking or even creating opportunities" (p. 10). The survivor, those who typically have "more than 10 years of service as chair, are more likely to have been selected by an administrator and to belong to large, stable departments" (p. 10). While some survivors provide organizational continuity and perspective, others have lost their capacity to enable others and need to be replaced. The transient is typically one who is elected to or has rotated into the position of department chair. The transient is typically just "serving their time." The adversarial department

chair typically emerges "from an unhappy and contentious faculty" (p. 11) and sees administrative decisions as being aimed at him or her personally.

Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly, and Beyer (1990) studied 200 department chairs in 70 colleges and universities. Data were collected by conducting telephone interviews and campus visits. Department chairs identified 15 strategies for developing a department, exercising leadership, and reaching out to faculty. The 15 strategies were grouped into three categories: preparing for the chair position, role as academic leader, and creating a positive interpersonal work environment. Three strategies for preparing for the department chair position included learning about the various roles and responsibilities in the department and the institution, creating a balance between professional and personal life, and preparing for a professional future.

Five strategies were identified for the role as an academic leader. These five strategies were as follows: establishing a collective department vision; developing faculty ownership of the vision; initiating changes slowly; allocating resources of time, information, and assignments to encourage vision; and monitoring the progress toward vision achievement.

Five strategies identified for creating a positive interpersonal work environment included establishing an open atmosphere to build trust; listening to faculty needs and interests; collaboratively setting goals, providing feedback to faculty, representing faculty to colleagues and senior administrators; serving as a role model and mentor; and encouraging and supporting faculty.

The department chairs further identified ways of applying strategies. These included making a personal commitment to help new faculty members, discussing

individual needs and expectations with faculty members, establishing a supportive environment for the faculty member, looking for tangible signs of adjustment and orientation, gathering background information on the faculty member's performance, clarifying goals and objectives, observing the performance of the faculty member, facilitating improvement and practice of new skills, monitoring the progress toward improvement, and advocating for the faculty member. Additional strategies included detecting problem situations as early as possible; clarifying the reasons for lack of performance; identifying a plan for improvement; following-up on the explanation; detecting signs of problems; mutually designing a plan of intervention; and arranging for activities, resources, and feedback.

Roach (1991) studied 130 full-time faculty members from a sample of 664 (20% return). Using a researcher-developed survey instrument compiled from various researchers and the literature base, Roach attempted to determine the methods or techniques department chairs rely on to create compliance among their faculty members. The primary finding Roach discussed was the reinforcing of the human relations strategy of gaining compliance through an employee orientation.

Gmelch (1991) studied 808 department chairs at over 100 universities and colleges to explore the department chair's view on use of time and role orientation. The study found that there was a dramatic reduction in the amount of time that department chairs spent with family (65%), personal friends (56%), and leisure activities (77%) due to their administrative duties as chair. Although there was a dramatic reduction in the amount of times spent with family, friends, and leisure activities, the time spent on spiritual and civic activities remained virtually the same. The authors also found that

60% of the department chairs perceived themselves as faculty, while 23% perceived themselves as administrators. The authors also noted that department chairs (80%) believed that their departmental responsibilities should be reduced so that they could devote more time to research, writing, and other interests in their field.

Gmelch and Carroll (1991) studied the structures within colleges and universities which cause conflict and strategies for coping with conflict. From the 808 department chairs in over 100 colleges and universities, 10 structural relationships were identified as creating conflict among faculty and administrators. These included level of organization, rules and regulations, degree of specialization, staff composition, nature of supervision, participation in decision making, sources of power, rewards and recognition, interdependence and roles and responsibilities. The authors also identified response strategies for conflict situations. Those response strategies included competition, accommodation, avoidance, compromise, and collaboration. The study further identified conflict resolution strategies: separating the person from the problem, focusing on interests as opposed to positions, generating a variety of possibilities before making a decision, and basing resolution on objective standards.

Carroll (1991) studied the career paths of 808 department chairs in 101 Carnegie Council Research I and II and Doctorate-Granting I and II institutions. Responses from 565 chairs were received (70%) and analyzed based on discipline, gender, and departmental hiring. Carroll stratified disciplines by hard and soft academic disciplines and pure and applied disciplines, noting the hard science chairs as being younger and less likely to return to a faculty position after serving as a chair. Applied chairs were older, responsible for smaller departments, and were more likely to leave the institution after

service in the chair position. Although few female chairs were identified (9%), they were found to be younger than male chairs at time of appointment and were more likely to be hired in an administratively oriented hiring system. For hiring systems, Carroll found administratively oriented hiring systems in hard and applied discipline groups, indicating reliance on external labor markets and a continuous departure from faculty to other administrative positions. He also stressed need to study the socialization and role orientation of department chairs.

Riggs and Akor (1992) studied 13 2-year public colleges to attempt to determine the degree to which department chairs could identify strategic planning from other forms of planning at their institutions. The authors noted that department chairs did understand the nature of strategic planning; however, the degree to which their institutions were practicing strategic planning was unclear. The authors suggested that institutions should consider employing a strategic planning program that "encompasses the administrators from the governing board, the president and key staff, and other members of the administration and faculty" (p. 71).

Gmelch and Burns (1993) studied 808 department chairs from 101 colleges and universities, obtaining a 70% response rate. The Department Chair Stress Index (DCSI) of 22 stress-related items was used to gather data on department chair stress. Gmelch and Burns found that the top three stressors for department chairs were too heavy a workload, obtaining program or financial approval, and trying to keep current in their discipline. Two types of strategies were suggested for coping with department chair stress: institutional strategies and department chair strategies. Institutional strategies for reducing department chair stress were restructuring of the position, purging unnecessary

administrative tasks, reversing the hierarchy, protecting the research interest of the chair, and providing training. Department chair strategies included time management, conflict resolution strategies, enabling constraints, and academic productivity.

Kinnick (1993) conducted a qualitative study to describe the information needs of department chairs. Using a sample of six veteran and new department chairs, she conducted two focus groups on the theme of how to use various information points. She identified the themes of calendars and personal issues as dominant with additional areas of attention including time on unplanned activities, feeling undervalued, and hand-compiled, antiquated, or inadequate information sources.

Seagren et al. (1993) presented findings based on the existing literature and research about the roles and responsibilities of department chairs, the requirements for leadership, the effective use of political influence and power, the department chair's role in faculty evaluation and development, the influence of institutional type and discipline on the department chair, and the future of the department chair. The authors presented findings on the different perceptions department chairs had of their role. The roles, tasks, and functions of department chairs reported included, but were not limited to internal administration, budgetary planning, personnel administration and communication, recruiting, evaluation, program development, decision making, organization, leadership ability, governance of department, instruction, faculty affairs, student affairs, professional development, and motivator.

Three groups were identified to describe leadership theories: natural leaders, organizational behavior, and organizational environment. The natural leader was defined in terms of one who has ambition, assertiveness, the ability to make decisions,

adaptability, self-confidence, vision, and the ability to articulate a vision. The organizational behavior theory emphasizes the "behavior of the group and sees leadership in terms of its effect on the behavior and perceptions of others" (Seagren et al., 1993, p. 18). The third theory, organizational environment, stressed the importance of the situation and the interaction between social, cultural, and political forces, and the leader and the organization as opposed to behavior of leaders and groups.

Seagren et al. (1993) also presented findings on the role that power and politics, both external and internal, have on the department chair position. Two types of power were identified: authority and influence. Authority is sanctioned by the organization and assigned to the position, whereas influence is an informal aspect exercised by the individuals in an organization. Influence is derived from personality, expertise, possession of knowledge, and a capacity to control opportunities for exploration.

The authors further presented findings on the role the department chair played in faculty evaluation and development. These findings reported the purpose of faculty evaluation, how to evaluate faculty, who should evaluate faculty, and the relationship of evaluation and faculty development. The authors also presented findings stressing the importance of getting faculty started through mentoring, orientation sessions, and addressing specific needs of faculty members.

Findings were also presented on the type of institutions and the training and development of department chairs, department topologies, and impact of discipline on the role of department chairs. The three types of institutions were identified: bureaucratic, collegial, and political. According to Seagren et al. (1993), the department structure of an organization is "connected to the university's size, the administrative complexity of the

general campus, and the institutional prestige" (p. 62). Future challenges reported by department chairs included: quality control, diversity and gender, funding, faculty recruitment and retention, professional development, faculty workload, evaluation, minority students and faculty, and ethics.

Seagren and Miller (1994) studied the demographic profile of 3000 community college department chairs. Their 30% response rate from the sample of 9000 indicated the average department chair was between 45-54, predominantly male (nearly 60%), almost exclusively white (89%), and had experience teaching in the community college (97%). They also found almost half (44%) had worked in a K-12 setting and two-thirds (65%) had worked in the private sector. Chairs responded that they spent 30-40 hours per week on chair responsibilities and the majority (58%) reported an additional salary stipend for their chair activities. They also reported release time from teaching for chair responsibilities and the majority held the position on a permanent rather than term basis.

Seagren and Miller (1994) also found the dominant roles of community college department chairs were planner, information disseminator, motivator, and facilitator. The primary skills found for chairing a department were sensitivity, judgment, organizational ability, leadership, decisiveness, and written and oral communication. The primary tasks identified were communication with upper-level administrators and the creation of a positive work environment. Predominant challenges identified for chairs were maintaining program quality, maintaining quality faculty, and strengthening curriculum. The authors did not identify consensus on particular strategies, but did note the strategies for reviewing curriculum, personal and professional life balance, and professional networking as the most frequently reported chairperson coping strategies.

Seagren et al.(1994) studied 3000 department chairs from a total of 9000 to attempt to determine the strategies for coping with job challenges and the responsibilities and personal characteristics of chairs. The challenges reported by department chairs were grouped into nine clusters: faculty challenges, student challenges, external relations challenges, technology challenges, program quality challenges, external accountability challenges, financial resources challenges, curriculum challenges, and internal accountability challenges.

Twenty-four strategies were identified by the department chairs. The top five strategies for coping with job challenges were conducting curriculum reviews to maintain relevance, balancing personal and professional activities, networking with other chairs, assessing future employment trends and opportunities, and increasing the emphasis on long-range institutional plans. The three least important strategies for coping with job challenges were writing job descriptions for chairs, participating in formal graduate courses, and reviewing and revising the organizational chart.

Fourteen roles reported by the department chairs were grouped into four clusters. Three major role clusters emerged: interpersonal role, administrator role, and leader role. According to the authors, the interpersonal role is related to the communication skills necessary for the department chair position. The administrative role cluster included the roles of resource allocator, evaluator, negotiator, and conflict resolver. "These roles require the ability to confront and work through potential differences with faculty and staff" (Seagren et al., 1994, p. 55). The leader role was comprised of the visionary, motivator, entrepreneur, delegator, and planner. According to Seagren et al. "these roles of the department chair are central to moving the department forward" (p. 55).

The study further identified 32 tasks performed by the department chair. These 32 tasks were grouped into seven clusters. These clusters consisted of professional development and communication, faculty selection and feedback, budget, internal, external, curriculum and student, and planning tasks. Of the 32 tasks reported, over half were perceived by the department chair to be either important or very important.

The study also presented findings on the skills needed for the department chair position. Twelve skills were reported and grouped into three clusters: administrative skills and leadership, interpersonal skills, and individual skills. The administrative skills are skills that department chairs need for the daily operation of the department. Interpersonal skills are the skills necessary for internal human resource management. Individual skills reported were considered to be the most important skills necessary for longevity in the department chair position.

Al-Karni (1995) studied the evaluation of department chairs in 62 Saudi colleges. Utilizing the perspective of the dean (supervisor), 46 responses were received in two of the chair-dominant areas, the academic role and the administrative role. Al-Karni found that the criteria used to evaluate the chairpersons' competencies in their academic roles were assigning teaching schedules, supervising the departments' academic programs, selecting new faculty, fostering good teaching performance, evidencing competence in teaching, and maintaining a good relationship with faculty members. The criteria for administrative evaluation included the behavior of departmental committees, the enhancement of the department's image and reputation, management of equipment, maintaining records, and defending the department's interest. Al-Karni stressed the importance of planning and plan implementation in the future evaluation of chairs.

Gmelch and Miskin (1995) studied 800 department chairs in universities and colleges and identified roles and responsibilities of department chairs. Four comprehensive roles of the department chairs emerged from the study: leader, scholar, faculty developer, and manager. Gmelch and Miskin further reported the various challenges, duties, and responsibilities of each of the four types of roles identified. Challenges the department chair faced as one in the leadership role were stratified into three categories: strategic issues, resource issues, and faculty issues. The top three strategic challenges identified were setting department priorities, restructuring the department during change, and developing stronger political support for the department. The least two important strategic challenges identified were diversity hiring in the department and politics within the department, the college, and the university. The top three resource challenges faced by department chairs were keeping track of current budget expenditures, maintaining department quality with fewer resources, and funding faculty positions and salary support. The least two important resource challenges reported by department chairs were finding new sources of funding and stabilizing funding for the department. The top three faculty challenges reported by department chairs were loss of talented faculty, attracting quality faculty, and rewarding productive faculty. The two least important faculty challenges reported were continually increasing demands on faculty and maintaining faculty morale.

The role of the department chair as faculty developer stressed the importance of recruiting quality faculty, motivating and preventing burnout, mentoring, networking, and evaluating faculty. Department chairs further reported that the tasks of the manager role

included managing budgets, resource decisions, developing department goals, planning resource allocations, and developing an action plan.

The role of scholar reported by department chairs (85%) was one of conflict between scholar and administrator. Department chairs reported that their workload should be reduced so that they could devote more time to research, writing, and other work in their field. The department chairs further reported that if they had no opportunity "for personal research that their jobs would be less satisfying" (Gmelch & Miskin, 1995, p. 133).

Conway (1996) reported his personal views on being a department chair, what the roles and responsibilities are, and how to cope with the challenges of the department chair position. Conway described the steps an individual would take from the faculty position to that of the chair position. Conway further described the importance of leadership, the setting of goals in the department chair position, and the challenges that department chairs face in the administration of their duties. These challenges included coping with different departmental personalities, ethics, salaries, retention, tenure and promotion, recruiting, making decisions, budgets, committees, and staff. Furthermore, Conway wrote about how to know when the time was right for leaving and what to do when leaving the chair position.

Miller and Seagren (1997) studied 3,000 department chairs in community colleges to determine the strategies for coping with job challenges. Twenty-four strategies were identified by department chairs. The top five coping strategies identified were conducting curriculum reviews, building stronger business and industry partnerships, balancing personal and professional activities, networking with other chairs, and

assessing future employment trends. The authors also noted that the two strategies least used by department chairs were taking graduate courses and reviewing or reviving organizational chart.

Critical Discussion

Literature on the historical development of the chair position has focused primarily on the time period that the chair position was first formalized and the impact played by business, industry, and politics in the formation of the administrative position. The growth and formation of the position took place during the period from the 1880s to 1925 due to the increased need for research and education in specialized areas. External as opposed to internal forces were the primary driving forces that resulted in formation of the administrative position between faculty and senior administration, purposely creating a liaison between the two. The external forces that propelled the growth of the chair position were the federal government, along with business and industry. As a result, the need for administrators to oversee the functions and operations of these specialized units or departments increased.

While the majority of the research on the historical development of the chair position has focused on when and why the chair position was developed, little research has been developed to examine the inter-relationship between the chair position's history, growth, and development and the overall development of higher education institutions. This lack of understanding about the co-evolution of chairs and their host institutions can be problematic for future generations of scholars, as there can be very real problems

associated with a lack of understanding about the relationship between parts of the whole, i.e., chairs, and the whole, i.e., institutions.

A review of the literature on the chair position indicated that the primary focus of research has been on the various roles and responsibilities, needed skills, and challenges and coping strategies facing the chairperson. The literature base has suggested that some of the various roles and responsibilities that the chair must cope with are personnel administration, budgeting, planning and organization, student affairs issues, professional development, decision-making, and program development.

Although a vast amount of research exists on the roles and responsibilities of chairpersons, stress related to the position and who is likely to assume these positions, there is a gap of knowledge on how to train for this middle management position. Indeed, chairperson training is a critical issue to be considered by many with any interest in higher education management, yet the body of scholars who have embraced this research agenda have largely ignored how to effectively train department chairs with measurable outcomes.

In all, the department chair position is admittedly important, yet research has only begun to be exploratory in nature. As with much literature on higher education management, scholars and practitioners alike have embraced the veneer of management, and have not undertaken the difficult concerns of how to break down and critically assess managers at the chair level. These individuals face a unique complexity in that they must behave as for-profit managers, controlling enrollment, offering a product in the form of classes and degrees, yet must also maintain some form of non-profit, developmental attitude about working with students and helping them grow up. The complexity is not

insurmountable, however, as many have succeeded in the chair position. Rather unfortunately, the literature base has not reflected in academic terms the best practice and benchmarking of department chair excellence.

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